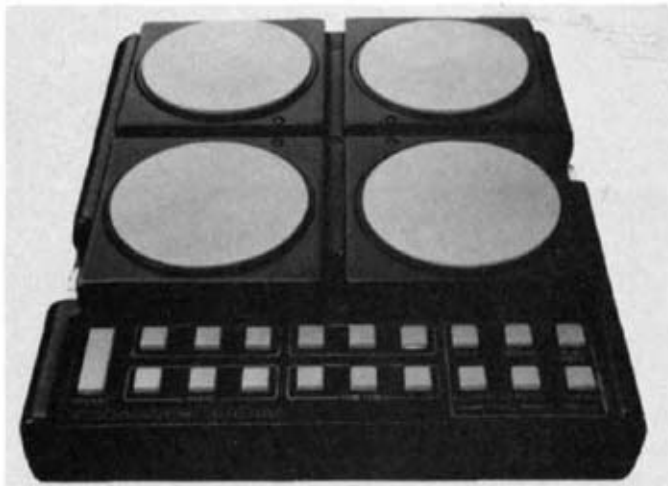


by Bob Saydlowski, Jr.



## Synsonics & The Kit

### MATTEL SYNSONICS

In August of '82, Mattel Electronics released their first electronic musical instrument—*Synsonics* Drums. *Synsonics* is a small electronic drum kit enclosed in a two-pound hard-plastic case. The unit can be played two ways: with sticks or fingers on four mounted pads, or via push-button keys.

The keys for snare drum, tom-tom 1, tom-tom 2, and cymbal are grouped into threes. Each sound has three rhythms: straight 8th-notes, 16th-notes, and 32nd-notes (roll), obtainable by pressing the corresponding key. By pressing different combinations, four auto-beat patterns (rock, offbeat, shuffle and 3/4) are also available for each sound. The cymbal can be made to sound like a closed hi-hat by pressing the Accent key at the left of the panel. To produce open/closed hi-hats, the Accent key is released when the open sound is desired.

A key for bass drum produces a metronomic pulse which is variable via two tempo keys marked Slower and Faster. Mattel states that the tempo can be set anywhere from 25 to 300 B.P.M., but I couldn't get it past 120. The bass drum can also be user-played by simultaneously pressing both tempo keys.

The drum keys are a bit restricting, and that's why there are also four round pads on *Synsonics*, set up like a drum kit for snare, cymbal, and two tom-toms. Each pad has a corresponding LED which flashes when the pad is struck. There is also an LED in the middle of the pad group which flashes the bass drum pulse. The pads are touch-sensitive and are firm enough to give good rebound, but the sensitivity is not adjustable. At times, the pads need a good whack to produce a sound.

The two toms have Syndrum-like

sounds. Tom-tom 1 is tunable over five octaves via a wheel mounted on the side of the unit. The snare and cymbal both use noise generation for their sounds. The snare is passable—a loose sound—but the cymbal doesn't really make it. It definitely needs a brighter, more metallic sound. The bass drum sounds like a tight studio-tuned drum, though sometimes, it just sounds like a click.

*Synsonics* can also be user-programmed. The unit has three 16-beat memories. Each memory can handle as many separate notes as you are able to play within a four-bar time frame. Pressing the 32nd note key throughout a memory loop would give 128 notes. The cymbal keys also function as memory selectors, and there are separate keys for record, playback, and stop memory. The memories can be layered indefinitely, but sounds cannot be stacked for a doubled sound. Memories can only be played back one at a time. *Synsonics* will record both pads and keys. When playing the bass drum manually, its sound cannot be programmed into a memory, but the tunable tom 1 can be brought down to bass drum pitch. Since the tune wheel only affects output, the tom cannot be tuned back and forth within a memory and be expected to play back those different pitches. When the unit is switched off, all memories are erased. The on/off wheel also serves as the volume control.

*Synsonics* is high impedance, and runs on six "C" batteries, or an AC adaptor, not included with the unit. There are jacks for headphones (also used for connection to a guitar amp), and for phono plugs, which are included; so *Synsonics* can be played through your home stereo. The left and right output jacks allow stereo pan-

ning of the unit: snare and tom-tom 1 = left channel; cymbal and tom-tom 2 = right channel, bass drum = left and right channels. A foot pedal controller will be coming soon for foot operation of the bass drum.

I found it lots of fun to create patterns using the memories. *Synsonics* can be used by drummers and non-drummers alike. It's great for introducing young children to rhythmic concepts, and for the pro player, it could be useful in live performance to set up a background pattern for accompaniment.

With its \$150 price tag, *Synsonics* is not as sophisticated as the Linn or Oberheim machines, though it was not designed for those purposes anyway. Mattel Electronics has been synonymous with fun, and that's exactly what *Synsonics* is.

### MXR: THE KIT

MPC Electronics of England is manufacturing a four-pound drumset synthesizer called *The Kit*. It's distributed by MXR Innovations in the States.

Four touch-sensitive pads are used for snare, bass drum, hi-tom and lo-tom. Brass switching pads function as cymbal, open hi-hat and closed hi-hat. Each pad has its own level control. Decay and sensitivity of each pad (except hi-hats) can be adjusted via trim pots on the underside of the unit. The cymbal pitch is also adjustable, and there is a control knob for cymbal tone.

*The Kit* features an automatic, metronomic hi-hat which is capable of 18 different patterns in either 4/4 or 3/4. Tempo of the hi-hat is adjustable, as is volume. A visual downbeat is given by an LED. The auto



hi-hat patterns can be deviated from by pressing the brass hi-hat pads to open or close the hi-hats.

The unit is low impedance and has separate outputs for each sound, allowing EQ for each drum if desired. There is also a mix output. Jacks are available for a hi-hat/bass drum foot switch, and for external device triggering. MPC has three accessories available: *Synkit* (giving Syndrum sounds), *Handclap* (claps and noise effects), and *The Tymp* (electronic timpani effect). The unit operates on a 9-volt battery or AC adaptor. As a battery saver, the unit is only turned on when a plug is inserted.

The hi-hat and snare sounds on *The Kit* are tighter than *Synsonics*. I found them to be a little closer to the real thing. I guess cymbals are the hardest to duplicate, because the cymbal sound *here* has quite an electronic twang to it. The two tom-toms approach pitched sounds, but still, they leave something to be desired. The drums cannot be user-tuned, and the *The Kit* is not programmable.

At times, the tom-tom pads produced a little distortion when hit hard. I do wish the pads were larger. The largest pads are approximately the size of the dot on an 8" C.S. head.

The manual states that *The Kit* is *not* intended for use with drumsticks; fingers do the job instead. Personally, I find it a bit disheartening to throw out years of practicing with sticks in order to play with fingers. Hand percussionists may be able to use *The Kit* in their set-up more readily than a set drummer. But perhaps some drummer will find a way to hang *The Kit* around his neck and step out in front while still playing, alongside the Moog liberation players. Retail: \$350.00.



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